

In the German concentration camps

Extracts from reports received by the I.T.F. in September 1938

Some German workers, after suffering several years of maltreatment, succeeded in escaping from a concentration camp. They sent the I.T.F. accounts of their terrible experiences and below we give some extracts from their stories. One cannot over-emphasize what goes on in these camps, especially at a time when certain states would yield before fascist blackmail and callously deliver millions of people to the dictators.

Concentration camp for telling the truth.

In March 1933 many arrests were carried out among workers in our little town in East Germany.

In the April following, a group of workers who had escaped the wave of arrests, published a pamphlet relating the truth about the Reichstag fire. The hand-printed pamphlet was circulated among the workers in our town. The Gestapo came to know of it, and a few days after the destruction of the trade unions arrested 55 workers.

Gestapo cross-examines.

Several workers were unable to stand the daily tortures and supplied the Gestapo with clues for further arrests. We were taken one by one from our cells and asked to disclose the name of the author of the pamphlet. Many really could not answer the question, and only knew whence they had the pamphlet. But when the answers were not to the liking of the interrogators, orders were given for the prisoner to be stripped and thrashed. This was done with heavy-handled, four-foot whips, whose tapering ends wound themselves round the naked body of the victim.

The cross-examination by no means ended with the whipping. The unconscious victim was thrown into a tank of cold water, and upon regaining consciousness subjected to another examination. If the answers were still unsatisfactory another method of torture was tried. S.A. men held the prisoner while the testicles were squeezed between two boards. After three weeks of this torture the Nazis had the information they wanted.

Some of the men held out and refused to make any disclosures in spite of all torture.

In prison.

Later we were transported to a prison. The gaoler who issued our clothing, hardly a person to suspect of being over-sensitive, shook his head when he saw the marks on our body of four weeks' stay in the Gestapo dungeons. The prison was no convalescent home, but at least we could lie on our mattresses at night without fear of nocturnal cross-examinations and torturings.

During the arrest pending trial contacts were established between a small group of prisoners. Several workers volunteered to confess to being the authors and chief distributors of the pamphlet, and to describe the others as innocent receivers. Consequently in the subsequent trial only six of the men were found guilty. The other 49 were acquitted but all were taken into custody again.

In the concentration camp.

The arrival of new prisoners in the concentration camp is a special enjoyment to the S.A. We had to change into the convict clothing in five minutes to the accompaniment of truncheon blows. Then we were driven up and down stairs a dozen times. When we finally found ourselves in the cells, S.A. kept on rushing in, dragged us out, questioned us and then maltreated us for making critical remarks about the Third Reich, although none of us had spoken a word. This went on all night.

Fearful experiences also were the visits to the latrines. In the concentration camp only buckets were provided, and the prisoners had to empty them. They had to grip the buckets by the dirtied handles and carry them at double-quick time and empty them into a pit. Visits to the latrines took place in groups, to the accompaniment of kicks and blows.

At the middle of February 193 I entered the Oranienburg concentration camp. This camp is notorious for its "obstacle track". Men are driven through a barbed wire entanglement and then made to crawl over a tree trunk spanning a ditch. When I slipped from this trunk, I was savagely beaten. In the Oranienburg camp the S.A. had a special grudge against Berlin anti-fascists, many of whom they knew personally. The Jews and men formerly prominent in the movement also had a specially bad time.

Transport of prisoners.

When our prisoners' car stopped in Papenburg - we were on the way to the Esterwegen concentration camp (near the Dutch frontier) - we were made to alight amidst much shouting and beating. We were then loaded into two lorries. We had to hold our hands behind our heads and shut our eyes. On each car a troop of S.S. mounted guard over us. At the entrance of our new quarters we were ironically welcomed by a band.

A black day.

A few of the beds in the camp were not ^{made} to the liking of the superintendent. For punishment he kept us running about the camp for two hours. After the evening roll call we had to line up for "drill".

Fifteen minutes' running exercise was followed by half an hour of knee-bending, the fourth movement of which had to be sustained for about half a minute. S.S. men watched us, and when those of us who were sick or old began to weaken, they held bayonets under them and jeered: sit on that!

The knee-bending was followed by an order to roll. We had to roll over and over on the ground until we were dizzy, and nearly all of us vomited. When the S.S. man in command saw this he ordered us roll back. So we had to roll back through our vomitings, for we dared not give up. To give up meant higher-degree torture.

After the rolling, we had to hop a distance with bent knees, and then crawl over the ground face downwards without the use of arms or legs. In the middle of the camp was a hollow of a depth of 1.5 metres and an area of 25 square metres, which was supposed to be intended for containing water for fire-extinguishing purposes. Through this holw we had to crawl. Fortunately there was no water in it. When I reached the other side I paused in exhaustion, clinging to the edge with my hands. One of the S.S. men saw me and began kicking my face to a bloody pulp. When I tried to get up without an order having been given, I received several kicks in the body. I was then carried to the sick-bay by fellow prisoners, and a doctor stitched the skin of my forehead, the torn eye-lid and the point of my nose. Next I was taken to the lock-up, where my hands and feet were tied. During the night I fainted repeatedly, and when I was to be hauled before the commandant in the morning I could not stand owing to agonizing abdominal pains. Bound hand and foot I was dragged before the commandant by two S.S. men and sentenced to six weeks penal gang on a charge of resistance, disobedience and slacking. Then I was required to work, and was thrashed until I tried. The work consisted in wheeling turf. Hands and

feet were shackled. The hand shackles were opened and laid on the wheelbarrow, and with shackled legs I was now required to wheel six heavy sods a distance of about 100 metres. When I tried to move the wheelbarrow I was assailed by a violent pain in the abdomen and fainted.

In the sick-bay.

I regained consciousness in the sick-bay. The doctor said I was shamming. In the room were several other prisoners, who had been taken ill the day before after the drill. They told me that one of the prisoners had died that night, as a result of a kick in the stomach. Those who shared quarters with him were accused of having murdered him. They were forbidden to go to work until the guilty ones had been found.

The doctor abused us and said that he would only tolerate healthy or dead prisoners in the camp. He enquired about our political past, and ordered us to stand in different corners of the room according to the size of the penalties we had already suffered. The doctor did not examine us. The assistant gave us camphor balls, one for each previous conviction. These we had to swallow, after which we were thrown out of the sick-bay. I collapsed at the door, and when I came to I found myself in an ambulance-car.

In the Maria Hospital I could not be operated on for some days owing to high fever. The kick I had received had torn the abdominal wall and injured the intestines. After the operation my temperature again rose above 41 degrees C. Suppuration had set in. The Catholic nurse did what she could, but I saw that my case was considered hopeless. I was asked to state my religion and give the names of my relatives. The operation wound was re-opened by the surgeon and washed out by means of a rubber tube.

Six weeks later I was able to leave bed. I weighed 43 kilogrammes. When I could leave the hospital after nine weeks my weight had recovered to 55 kilogrammes.

In the hospital I met many fellow sufferers from other camps of the Ems district. All had been injured under similar circumstances. One of them was Hans Litten. He came from Königsberg, in Prussia, where his father was professor at a university. Litten had joined the socialist movement after the assassination of Jean Jaurès, and after the war belonged to the Socialist Labour Youth. Up to 1933 he acted as legal counsel for many anti-fascists. In the Felseneck trial he had forced Hitler to admit that the Nazi Party was arming terror gangs. He had humiliated the Führer, and for that he went to the concentration camp. In Moor he had fallen under the wheels of a diesel locomotive, sustaining a complicated fracture of the thigh-bone. He had lain in plaster of Paris dressing for several weeks already.

One day there appeared in the Papenburg sick-ward the former commandant of the Oranienburg camp, Schäfer. He walked along the beds and saw Litten. He approached the latter's bed and asked, Do you remember me, you effeminate semi-Jewish sow. Litten answered, Yes, from the Felseneck trial. Schäfer then ordered Litten to remove his glasses and struck him in the face ten times with his grey buckskin gloves.

The hospital doctor coloured and walked off. When Schäfer and his adjutant Daniels had left the hospital, the doctor apologised as National Socialist to Litten for Schäfer's conduct. The latter must have got to know of this, for a few days later the doctor disappeared. From prisoners of the Dachau concentration camp whom I met later I heard that the doctor, Dr Schüler, had also been imprisoned there. What became of him I do not know.

The new doctor for the patients from the Ems district concentration camp was the S.A. medical officer Teigeler. He was regularly drunk and criminally indifferent to the patients. The nurses, who had revered Dr Schüler for his devotion to his work, shook their heads in bewilderment at the orders of Dr Teigeler. Thus he ordered the removal of Litten's plaster dressing, and the next day sent him back to the camp without any further treatment. Patients subsequently arriving from Papenburg related that the day following his dismissal from the hospital Litten had been forced to work with his incompletely cured leg.

Hans Litten probably suffered more at the hands of the Nazi fiends than anybody else in Germany. His life in the concentration camp was one drawn-out torture. Owing to the interest taken in his case abroad, no recourse was had to the tried method of dispatching him "during an attempt to escape". The object was to torture him until in desperation he took his own life.

After two months I was dismissed from the Maria Hospital and sent back to the concentration camp. I still had to serve the six-week sentence in the penal gang pronounced against me in April for disobedience.

In the penal gang.

Upon entering the quarters of the penal gang hands and feet are shackled. The cells can be darkened at any time by shutters. The cells are without sanitary pail or mattress or blankets. Yet new entrants to the penal gang, who have to spend the first fourteen nights in standing cells, regard the ordinary cells with longing.

The standing cells are 1.50 metres high, 1 metre wide and 1 metre deep. The prisoners' hands are shackled behind their back, a chain descends from the handcuffs to the 60-cm. chain connecting the foot-shackles. In this condition one is thrown into the standing cell. In spite of everything, the occupants of the cells may fall into that dazed condition between sleep and wakefulness. But then the guards appear, throw open the door, and the occupant must step out and say aloud "prisoner so and so sentenced to six weeks penal gang for disobedience." All the occupants are marched off to the latrines. This is repeated every hour during the night. Woe him who falls asleep and does not hear the door open. He is dragged out, kicked and ordered to do half an hour rolling.

Working in shackles.

At three a.m. we had to turn out for work. The handcuffs were unlocked and laid on the barrow. The foot-shackles remained. The work would perhaps have not been so bad if it had been of any use. Six heavy slabs of turf had to be carted a distance of about a hundred yards and there unloaded. Then the barrow had to be reloaded with turf from a pile on the same spot. And this senseless carting backwards and forwards went on for three hours, from three to six a.m. At six o'clock there was a half-hour break for breakfast, and then carting was resumed for thirteen continuous hours, until seven p.m. From seven to eight there was a "dinner" interval. Then followed two hours' drill. Shackles were removed, and we had to march, crawl, hop, bend knees, and at the least sign of weakening some "rolling" too. Kicks and blows were plentiful. After the drill we were shackled again and locked up in the cells.

Today I do not know whence I got the force to endure it all. When we heard how a prisoner desperately besought an S.S. guard to shoot him, and then, after the latter had advised him to pretend to attack an uniformed man, saw how he was murdered, I always stiffened and determined to hold out. Even while men were in death agony the guards kicked them in their faces till they were dead. Many times we were witness of that.

Specialized floggings.

From Berlin arrived a flogging frame, a wooden affair over which the victim had to bend with straps passing over neck, back and knee-joints.

Those guilty of a mistake when making their bed, drilling or saluting an S.S. man, or otherwise attracting notice, were sentenced to 25 strokes. They had to put on thin canvas trousers and after being examined by the camp doctor were strapped to the flogging frame. The shed mates of the victim had to stand round and watch, while an especially hefty S.S. man did the flogging. The victim was required to count the strokes aloud. After the first blows with the heavy whip the skin burst and blood streamed down the legs and ankles, the trousers

turned red, and at the following blows blood squirted into the faces of the bystanders. The white canvas trousers was a defect in the staging. The doctor, always in S.S. uniform and armed with revolver, usually stopped the punishment after the first ten strokes. But when the wounds were healed after three weeks in hospital, the remaining strokes were given. To avoid these interruptions, black trousers were introduced. These did not show the blood so much, and the doctor no longer objected to the 25 blows. Usually the victim fainted after 15 blows, and the S.S. man then went on flogging the unconscious man till he was tired.

It was mass torture. Moral anguish distorted the faces of those compelled to look on. They trembled with powerless hatred, but had to stand to attention all the time. The S.S. guards watched them closely, looking for signs of "state-hostile" gestures. They wanted new victims for the flogging frame.

Night drill.

To prevent the prisoners from forgetting their lot at night "fire drill" was organized. This took place fortnightly, but at irregular intervals, so that one did not know when to expect it. On such occasions sirens sounded in the middle of the night. Search-lights shone from the two machine-gun towers. The guards of the several sheds roared "night drill" and all the men tumbled out of bed. Everyone grabbed what clothing he could and rushed out into the open. Each shed housed about 150 men. Everyone knew what it meant to be the last to traverse the door. This door was 1.20 metres wide, and over a hundred men were trying to wedge themselves through it. On both sides were posted S.S. men, who belaboured the throng at the door with rifle-butts and truncheons. Woe to the last to get through.

From the towers rattled the machine-guns, and although we knew that the presence of S.S. men protected us against being shot at, there was a panic, which was intensified by the groans of the beaten, the howling of the sirens and the glare of the search-lights.

Thus we lined up on both sides of the camp lane, most of us half naked. Usually cold rainy and windy weather was chosen for the nocturnal drill. The S.S. guards were in warm uniform, heavy boots and waterproofs. They always pretended that someone was absent. After the numbering the shed leaders reported to the company leaders who passed the number on, and it always transpired that there were men short. This was repeated three or four times. Meanwhile we stood half naked three to four hours in rain and wind. The company leaders jeeringly told us to shiver ourselves warm. When the farce had lasted long enough we were ordered back to the sheds, and had to be quick about it, as otherwise we were called back and made to stand in the rain again.

An illegal journal.

In the summer 193. an illegal journal repeatedly appeared in the camp. This came to the knowledge of those in charge, and a search was made. But without result.

The S.S. then seized hostages. Eight men were taken outside the camp and given a flogging. We were summoned one by one to state who had read the journal in the camp. This went on for three hours, to the accompaniment of all degrees of torture. We were promised immediate release from the camp if we disclosed the names. None of us turned traitor, for all knew what the consequences would have been: the shooting of scores of prisoners. The guards were furious. The chief stated that he knew there were readers of the journal amongst us, and seeing they had not the courage to own up we should all have to suffer.

S.S. plays massacre.

It was night and in the light of search lights we were marched heavily guarded to the heath. So knew what was to happen. The most dramatic scene loses its effect if always played before the same spectators. We did the bidding of the S.S. sadists and dug a grave, though we were certain that none of us would enter it that night. After the

guards had aimed their rifles at us, fumbling at the safety-catch and pretending they were about to fire, an S.S. man turned up according to arrangement and whispered in the ear of the squad leader. Thereupon we were marched back.

Here an S.S. man called on four men to take part in a new game. I was one of the unlucky ones. We had to place our hands in the frame of a door, which was then slammed twice. I cannot describe what I felt when I wrenched my fingers out of the firmly closed door. Eight of them were crushed.

But none of us had disclosed anything about the journal. Comrades bandaged our fingers. It was a very long time before I could use them again. After my first experience I did not visit the camp doctor again.

Shot while trying to escape.

It was observable that certain of the prisoners had been marked by the Gestapo of their home town for special treatment. Such men had to stand apart at the gate, so that the already selected murderers might take a look at their victims.

During work on the heath or elsewhere outside the camp the gangs worked within a cordon of S.S. men armed with rifles and revolvers, in the case of large gangs also a machine-gun. Those brought to the camp to be murdered were set to work apart from the others. After a while the S.S. guards withdrew, so that the doomed man found himself outside the cordon. This ranked as an attempt to escape, S.S. men began to shout and the prisoner was shot at from all sides. At the first shots the sirens began to howl, and we all knew that another comrade had been murdered. When the sirens went off all prisoners had to line up for a roll call.

Such incidents took place nearly weekly. The shooting of a prisoner meant a number of advantages to the S.S. A man who could prove he had brought down a prisoner trying to escape was promoted to squad leader, with a corresponding increase in pay. If he already had this rank, the reward was eight days' leave.

Jews and Bible Researchers.

One morning all the Jews in the camp were called up. From experience we could guess what was afoot. We knew that such a proceeding had to be connected with some event outside the camp. So we were not surprised when, this time, the newspaper we were allowed to read in the camp after censorship, reported the shooting of the Nazi leader in Switzerland, Gustloff, by a Jew.

The Jews were divided into a number of small gangs, which were put in the charge of the toughest of the S.S. men. One of these gangs had the task of emptying the latrines. This was done by means of a wagon, which had to be dragged a long distance over the soft soil of the heath. Hitherto the wagon had been dragged by fourteen men, but now the gang was reduced to eight. While kicks and blows rained on them, the unfortunate men strained at the wagon, which only progressed by inches. They were not allowed to use the pump for emptying the latrines, but pails which had to be passed from hand to hand and emptied into the wagon. Owing to the furious rate at which work had to proceed, the Jews were soon covered from head to foot with filth. Long after we had stopped work, the Jewish latrine gang had to continue. One day the first man in the pail gang was knocked into the pit by an S.S. gang leader. Two others had to drag him out. The S.S. man pretended that the poor devil had jumped into the pit because he wanted to shirk work. The man, in his terrible state, was made to do knee-bending exercises and to hop with outstretched arms. Next he was ordered to roll, whereupon he vomited and fainted. The gang leader then set his dog at the unconscious man, but the animal merely sniffed at him and moved away. Several S.S. men then threw pails of water over the prostrate man. When he regained consciousness he was ordered to accompany the gang leader outside the camp. Shortly afterwards we heard the report of a revolver shot. The sirens hooted, and the prisoners rushed out of the sheds for the line-up. The commandant informed us that a dirty Jew had attacked the gang leader and had paid the penalty. The following day the coffin containing the

corpse of the murdered man was placed in the middle of the camp. The Jewish prisoners had to stand in a semi-circle around the coffin and sing Jewish songs. The others had to file past the coffin and spit on it. The Jews were treated in this way for another few weeks, and only dropped into the background upon the arrival of 80 "Bible Researchers", a sect most hated by the Nazis after the Jews.

It was the usual thing in the camp to force men imprisoned for religious anti-fascist propaganda to make fun of their beliefs. Thus once the Cologne preacher Spieker had to make a farcical speech before the assembled inmates of the camp. He delivered the speech as required by the Nazis, and then was given a beating because he had spoken differently from the pulpit. The Bible Researchers, however, never yielded to such coercion. No torture was capable of forcing them to hold up their religious convictions to ridicule. Trials were pending against the Bible Researchers, so that they could not be "shot while trying to escape". But for this fact they would have been shot down in scores. Now, however, no form of torture was spared them. We other prisoners lived on the most friendly terms with the Bible Researchers. They did not take part in our political discussions, but knew all about the clandestine material in our possession. During searches and the following mass punishments, however, they were as steadfast as anybody and never gave away a comrade.

TEN THOUSANDS OF MEN AND WOMEN, TRADE UNIONISTS, SOCIALISTS, CATHOLICS, BIBLE RESEARCHERS, COMMUNISTS, HONEST S.A. MEN, JEWS, PROTESTANTS AND PACIFISTS, ARE STILL BEING TORTURED IN HITLER'S CONCENTRATION CAMPS, EVERY DAY, EVERY NIGHT.....